

6 November 2012

TO: Senate Natural Resources, Environment and Great Lakes Committee

From: Rolf O. Peterson, Houghton, MI

Re: Testimony re. Senate bill 1350

The following information is my assessment of the merits of SB1350, introduced by Senator Thomas Casperson, which provides for the establishment of a hunting season for gray wolves in Michigan.

Summary: I urge members of this committee to OPPOSE passage of SB1350, on the grounds that it is based on an incorrect premise clearly stated by Senator Casperson on his website -- that wolf numbers in Michigan far exceed population goals. In fact, there are no population goals for wolves in Michigan. Furthermore, the proposed bill unnecessarily provides for a license fee that is excessively high and will likely discourage hunter participation. Such details should be left to the Natural Resources Commission, acting with the advice of professionals in the Department of Natural Resources. In addition, I provide detailed information on some important benefits now provided by the resident wolf population in Michigan, through predation on deer.

DISCLAIMER: I offer the following views and perspective as a private citizen of Michigan, not a reflection in any way of positions or viewpoints of the federally-appointed Recovery Team for the Gray Wolf, Eastern Population (which I chair), the School of Forest Resources and Environmental Science at Michigan Technological University (where I am a Research Professor), or the International Wolf Center (where I am a member of the Board of Directors).

Senator Tom Casperson provides, on his official website, the rationale for the proposed legislation:

“ ‘With wolf numbers far-exceeding population goals, I continue to hear of the impacts they are having on people’s lives and businesses,’ Casperson said. ‘Residents across the Upper Peninsula have repeatedly asked for a game season to help control the wolf population, reduce livestock and pet depredation and enhance public safety.’ “

This rationale begins with a false statement. In fact, *there are no numerical population goals for wolves in Michigan*. The Michigan Wolf Management Plan (hereafter, MWMP), approved in 2008, explicitly states that the recovery goal of 200 wolves is NOT a target population size. Evidently Senator Casperson is confusing Michigan with Wisconsin, where there is a population goal (quite possibly impractical and not achievable). The MWMP does not have a provision for a hunting/trapping season for wolves because the stakeholders group that produced the plan could not agree on the

rationale and parameters for such a season. Rather, the MWMP provides many recommendations for living with wolves while reducing conflict. SB1350 addresses none of the recommendations of the MWMP; rather it advances one controversial point that was not, in fact, recommended by the MWMP. I believe Senator Casperson and other members of this committee should study the MWMP carefully, then work to implement its recommendations.

The \$100 license fee proposed by SB1350 represents an arbitrary and unnecessary detail that will, I feel, actually reduce the potential for public hunting and trapping to reduce conflicts. There is no question in my mind that wolves can be very inconvenient at times, presenting serious challenges to wolf-human coexistence. The MWMP explains that targeted public hunting and trapping might, if carefully planned, help reduce wolf-human conflict. But these conflicts can already be managed under existing state law, which allows for lethal control of individual wolves that are perceived to threaten human life and property. A license fee of \$100 is very high and may discourage participation of Michigan citizens in future public hunting and trapping. Those details should not appear in legislation, as the Natural Resources Commission provides the proper venue for making such decisions.

I am surprised that T. Casperson presents, on his website, a surprisingly one-sided view about wolves – all negative. Again, members of this committee should study the MWMP, which recommends in some detail how wolf-human coexistence might be fostered in a positive sense.

I think there are several areas where wolves are already playing a role in remaking the Upper Michigan ecosystem. The total positive economic impact would be measured in hundreds of millions of dollars. I presume Senator Casperson is interested in my views, since I am one of his constituents. Following are some subjects that all decision-makers should understand.

- 1) Wolves provide a firewall against new diseases in deer. A very obvious example may be chronic wasting disease (CWD). So far CWD has not spread into areas inhabited by wolves, anywhere in the United States, and the logical hypothesis is that wolves simply cull out diseased animals. The public health significance of CWD is hotly debated. However, based on my conversations with many wildlife veterinarians, I will gladly consume venison from the U.P. but I won't eat deer from the CWD district in central Wisconsin.
- 2) Wolves probably help reduce deer in some areas of the U.P., particularly in the snowbelt region (this is the subject of current DNR research). This has potential importance in three areas: (A) Reduces car-deer accidents and the resulting injuries and fatalities to humans. Since deer often escape unharmed even when people are killed trying to evade them on the road, there are no statistics on this. However, I know two former residents of the City of Houghton who died after car accidents that resulted from trying to avoid a collision with a deer; (B) Wolves are able to achieve high kill rates of deer in deeryards that are dominated by lowland coniferous tree species. Because of high deer densities, regeneration is

frequently lacking for these conifer species and many of the deciduous tree species favored by deer. The future of the forest products industry in Michigan will be favorably influenced by the presence of wolves; (C) Wolves increase the future potential for maintaining a population of moose in the U.P. Moose were introduced in the mid-1980s and are currently holding their own and perhaps slowly expanding from a core population in the Michigamme highlands between L'Anse and Marquette. This is a deep-snow area that deer largely vacate during winter, and this separates moose from deer and the fatal impacts of brainworm. Wolves help enforce this separation by maintaining a high kill rate of deer when snow is deep. If Michigan is able to maintain a resident moose population far into the future, it may be attributable to the presence of wolves.

Rolf Peterson
605 W 2nd St.
Houghton, MI 49931
906-482-4696